

A Narrative Review Of Job Satisfaction And Career Development Among Dental Assistants In The Saudi Dental Sector

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Abstract

Background:

Dental assistants are integral to the efficiency and quality of dental care delivery, yet their job satisfaction and career development opportunities remain underexplored in Saudi Arabia. Understanding these factors is essential for improving workforce stability and aligning with Saudi Vision 2030 goals for healthcare transformation.

Aim:

This narrative review examines the current state of job satisfaction and career development among dental assistants in the Saudi dental sector, identifying key influencing factors, interrelationships, challenges, and policy implications.

Methods:

A narrative review methodology was employed, with literature sourced from PubMed, Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar, and the Saudi Digital Library. Studies published between 2010 and 2025 in English or Arabic were included if they addressed job satisfaction, workplace conditions, training, or career progression of dental assistants in Saudi Arabia. Relevant international literature was also reviewed for comparative insights.

Results:

Findings indicate moderate overall job satisfaction among Saudi dental assistants, with higher satisfaction in teamwork and patient interaction, but lower satisfaction in salary progression and career advancement opportunities. Factors influencing satisfaction include work environment, compensation, workload, interpersonal relationships, and recognition. Career development is hindered by limited specialization options, unequal access to continuing professional development (CPD), and non-standardized promotion pathways. The review highlights a clear link between accessible career growth opportunities and higher job satisfaction levels.

Conclusion:

Enhancing job satisfaction and career development for dental assistants in Saudi Arabia requires standardized career frameworks, expanded CPD accessibility, and adoption of international best

practices adapted to local needs. These measures would not only improve workforce retention but also support the delivery of high-quality dental care in line with national healthcare objectives.

Keywords: Dental assistants, job satisfaction, career development, Saudi Arabia, continuing professional development, workforce retention, Vision 2030

1. Introduction

The dental sector in Saudi Arabia has undergone significant growth over the past two decades, driven by government investment, expansion of public and private dental clinics, and an increasing focus on oral health as part of the national healthcare strategy. Dental assistants play a crucial role in ensuring the efficiency, quality, and safety of dental care delivery. Their responsibilities extend beyond chairside assistance to include infection control, patient education, administrative duties, and support in clinical procedures.

Job satisfaction among dental assistants is a critical factor influencing not only their individual well-being but also patient care quality, staff retention, and organizational performance. Career development opportunities, including access to continuing education, structured training programs, and clear promotion pathways, are equally essential to maintaining a motivated and competent workforce. In the Saudi context, the profession of dental assisting is regulated by the Saudi Commission for Health Specialties (SCFHS), which oversees licensing, training requirements, and professional standards. However, challenges remain in ensuring consistent job satisfaction levels and equitable career development opportunities across the Kingdom's diverse regions.

Given the high proportion of female dental assistants and the varied work environments in public and private sectors, understanding the interplay between job satisfaction and career growth is vital for workforce sustainability. This understanding can inform policy decisions, enhance workplace conditions, and improve retention rates in line with Saudi Vision 2030 goals for healthcare transformation.

Objectives

The main objectives of this narrative review are to:

1. Explore the current state of job satisfaction among dental assistants working in Saudi Arabia.
2. Identify factors influencing job satisfaction, including work environment, compensation, workload, recognition, and professional relationships.
3. Examine the availability and effectiveness of career development opportunities for dental assistants in the Saudi dental sector.
4. Highlight the relationship between career advancement and job satisfaction within the Saudi context.
5. Provide evidence-based recommendations to policymakers, healthcare administrators, and professional bodies to improve both job satisfaction and career development pathways.

2. Methodology of the Narrative Review

This review adopts a narrative approach to synthesize existing literature on job satisfaction and career development of dental assistants in the Saudi dental sector. Unlike systematic reviews, which follow rigid protocols for data selection and analysis, a narrative review provides flexibility in integrating findings from diverse sources, allowing for a broader contextual understanding of the topic.

2.1 Search Strategy

The literature search was conducted between June and August 2025 across multiple databases, including PubMed, Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar, and Saudi Digital Library (SDL). Keywords and Boolean operators were applied to maximize search sensitivity and specificity. Examples include:

- **Primary terms:** “dental assistant,” “job satisfaction,” “career development,” “professional growth”
- **Context terms:** “Saudi Arabia,” “Saudi dental sector,” “dental clinics,” “oral healthcare workforce”
- **Boolean combinations:** (“dental assistant” AND “job satisfaction”) AND (“Saudi Arabia” OR “Saudi dental sector”)

2.2 Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Inclusion criteria:

- Studies published between 2010 and 2025
- Research conducted in Saudi Arabia or including Saudi-specific data
- Peer-reviewed journal articles, official reports, and governmental publications
- Studies addressing job satisfaction, workplace conditions, training, or career development of dental assistants

Exclusion criteria:

- Studies unrelated to dental assistants (e.g., dentists, hygienists, or other allied healthcare staff without direct comparison)
- Publications not available in English or Arabic
- Opinion pieces lacking empirical data

2.3 Study Selection Process

An initial screening of titles and abstracts was performed to remove duplicates and irrelevant studies. Full-text reviews were then conducted to ensure alignment with the review objectives. In addition to primary studies, relevant international literature was included to provide a comparative perspective and highlight best practices applicable to the Saudi context.

2.4 Data Extraction and Synthesis

Key data extracted from each study included:

- Author(s) and year of publication
- Location and setting
- Sample size and characteristics
- Study design
- Main findings related to job satisfaction and/or career development
- Relevance to the Saudi dental sector

The synthesis was performed thematically, grouping findings under recurring categories such as work environment, compensation, professional training, promotion opportunities, and organizational support.

2.5 Limitations of the Review

This narrative review is limited by the potential for publication bias and by the reliance on available published data, which may underrepresent certain regions or private-sector settings in Saudi Arabia. Additionally, the narrative nature of the review means that findings are interpreted in a descriptive rather than statistical meta-analytic manner.

3. Job Satisfaction of Dental Assistants

3.1 Definition and Conceptual Framework

Job satisfaction refers to the extent to which individuals feel positively about their work roles, encompassing both intrinsic factors—such as recognition and a sense of achievement—and extrinsic factors—such as salary, benefits, and working conditions (Locke, 1976). In healthcare settings, job

satisfaction directly affects employee retention, service quality, and patient satisfaction. For dental assistants, satisfaction is often shaped by a combination of technical responsibilities, interpersonal interactions, and administrative duties inherent in their role.

3.2 Factors Influencing Job Satisfaction in Dental Assistants

A safe, well-equipped, and ergonomically sound work environment contributes to reduced physical strain and enhanced morale. In Saudi Arabia, modern urban dental centers generally offer better ergonomic designs and access to digital tools, whereas rural clinics may lack such resources, which can impact comfort and performance. Compensation is another critical determinant of satisfaction. Several Saudi studies highlight disparities between public and private sectors, with public institutions typically offering more stable benefits but sometimes lower salary increments compared to high-end private clinics. Workload and scheduling also play a significant role. Long working hours, understaffing, and high patient turnover can lead to fatigue and burnout. In the Saudi private sector, dental assistants often report irregular hours and pressure to meet patient quotas. Interpersonal relationships have a notable influence on morale. Positive relationships with dentists, other assistants, and administrative staff enhance teamwork and job satisfaction, while hierarchical environments and a lack of mutual respect can diminish it. Recognition and appreciation from supervisors and patients also contribute to retention and engagement. Studies show that in Saudi clinics, dental assistants who receive regular performance feedback and acknowledgment report higher satisfaction levels.

3.3 Measurement Tools in Previous Studies

Saudi-based research has employed instruments such as the Minnesota Satisfaction Questionnaire (MSQ) and the Job Descriptive Index (JDI) to evaluate satisfaction levels. These tools are often adapted to local contexts, and surveys frequently combine quantitative Likert-scale items with open-ended qualitative questions to capture nuanced perspectives.

Several studies conducted in Saudi Arabia report moderate overall job satisfaction among dental assistants, with the highest satisfaction scores typically observed in areas related to teamwork and patient interaction (Al-Saleh et al., 2022; Alotaibi & Khan, 2021). These findings suggest that interpersonal relationships and the collaborative nature of dental practice are significant positive contributors to morale. However, salary progression and career advancement opportunities remain persistent concerns across both public and private sectors (Alshehri et al., 2018; AlHumaid, 2020). In public hospitals, job security, structured working hours, and stable benefits packages are strong satisfaction drivers, yet the fixed pay scales and seniority-based promotions limit financial growth and professional mobility (Ministry of Health, 2017). In contrast, private clinics may offer higher entry-level salaries but often lack long-term job stability and formalized career pathways (Alotaibi & Khan, 2021). Another recurring challenge is the limited availability of specialized training and continuing professional development (CPD) opportunities, particularly in rural and remote regions, which restricts professional growth and further affects satisfaction levels (SCFHS, 2020).

Globally, dental assistants in countries such as Australia, the United States, and the United Kingdom report similar concerns regarding workload, recognition, and career stagnation. However, the situation in Saudi Arabia is made more complex by the higher reliance on expatriate dental assistants and the limited availability of local training pathways, which can further restrict professional mobility and development.

Table 1. Summary of Selected Studies on Job Satisfaction of Dental Assistants in Saudi Arabia

Author(s) & Year	Location & Setting	Sample Size	Key Findings on Job Satisfaction	Notable Saudi Context Insights
Al-Saleh et al., 2022	Riyadh – Public & Private Clinics	250	Moderate satisfaction overall; highest in teamwork, lowest in salary satisfaction	Public sector offers stability; private clinics offer higher pay but less job security
Alotaibi & Khan, 2021	Jeddah – Private Dental Centers	180	High satisfaction with dentist relationships; dissatisfaction with irregular working hours	Private clinics have flexible schedules but higher workload pressure
AlHumaid, 2020	Eastern Province – Government Hospitals	120	Satisfaction in patient interaction and job stability; low in career growth	Limited CPD opportunities in public sector despite job security
Alshehri et al., 2018	Multiple Regions	300	Salary, recognition, and professional development are key predictors of job satisfaction	Regional disparities influence job satisfaction levels
Ministry of Health Report, 2017	National Survey	1,000+	Majority satisfied with work environment; dissatisfaction with promotion and salary increments	Gap in standardized career pathways across regions

4. Career Development Opportunities

Career development refers to the structured progression of an individual's professional skills, responsibilities, and qualifications over time. For dental assistants, it encompasses opportunities for continuing education, advanced training, specialization, and access to clear promotion pathways. In Saudi Arabia, training for dental assistants is offered through vocational institutes, universities, and on-the-job programs. The Saudi Commission for Health Specialties (SCFHS) plays a central role by overseeing licensing requirements, competency assessments, and continuing professional development (CPD) regulations. Despite the existence of these frameworks, opportunities for advanced specialization remain limited, and career ladders are not standardized across institutions.

Continuing professional development is a mandatory requirement for license renewal under SCFHS guidelines. Dental assistants can participate in CPD activities such as workshops, online courses, conferences, and hands-on clinical training. However, access to these opportunities varies greatly depending on geographical location, employer support, and financial resources. Urban centers, particularly Riyadh, Jeddah, and Dammam, tend to offer more CPD events, while rural areas often face accessibility challenges.

Promotion prospects for dental assistants in Saudi Arabia are often tied to years of service rather than competency-based achievements. While private sector organizations may occasionally offer merit-based promotions, these systems are usually informal and inconsistent. In public institutions, upward mobility is limited, with many promotions leading to administrative positions rather than advanced clinical roles.

Several barriers hinder career advancement for dental assistants in the Kingdom. These include the scarcity of advanced training programs within Saudi Arabia, unequal access to CPD opportunities

between urban and rural regions, the financial burden of self-funded education, and the lack of formal recognition for specialized roles in policy frameworks.

In contrast, countries such as Canada and Australia have well-defined career ladders for dental assistants, enabling them to specialize in fields such as orthodontics, oral surgery, or practice management, with corresponding certification and salary adjustments. Adapting similar models within Saudi Arabia could enhance both career satisfaction and workforce retention, aligning with the broader objectives of Saudi Vision 2030 to strengthen healthcare capacity and quality.

5. Interrelationship between Job Satisfaction and Career Development

Career development and job satisfaction are closely intertwined, particularly in professions such as dental assisting, where skill enhancement and recognition directly affect motivation and retention. In the Saudi dental sector, the availability of structured career pathways, accessible training programs, and clear promotion criteria plays a decisive role in shaping job satisfaction levels. Dental assistants who perceive opportunities for professional growth are more likely to report higher satisfaction, greater commitment to their employers, and stronger engagement in patient care.

Conversely, the absence of defined career progression routes can lead to stagnation, reduced motivation, and increased turnover. In many Saudi settings, career advancement is primarily seniority-based, which may discourage younger or high-performing staff seeking merit-based recognition. This is particularly relevant in the private sector, where performance-driven promotions are inconsistent and sometimes absent altogether.

Research indicates that when employers actively invest in continuing professional development—whether by funding CPD activities, providing flexible scheduling for training, or creating mentorship programs—dental assistants not only gain new competencies but also develop a greater sense of value and belonging within their workplace. This, in turn, enhances retention rates and overall service quality. In alignment with Saudi Vision 2030, fostering such professional growth opportunities could strengthen workforce stability and elevate the standards of dental care nationwide.

6. Challenges and Gaps in the Saudi Context

Despite ongoing efforts to strengthen the healthcare workforce in line with Saudi Vision 2030, several challenges continue to affect the job satisfaction and career development of dental assistants in the Kingdom. One of the most significant issues is the absence of standardized career pathways. While the Saudi Commission for Health Specialties (SCFHS) sets licensing and CPD requirements, there is no unified framework outlining clear progression from entry-level to advanced or specialized roles. This lack of structure often leaves dental assistants uncertain about long-term career prospects.

Geographic disparities further compound the problem. Urban centers such as Riyadh, Jeddah, and Dammam tend to have better-equipped dental facilities, more frequent CPD events, and greater exposure to advanced technologies. In contrast, rural and remote regions often lack the infrastructure, resources, and training opportunities necessary to support professional growth. This uneven distribution of resources contributes to lower satisfaction levels among dental assistants in less developed areas.

Another pressing gap lies in research and data availability. While a growing body of studies addresses job satisfaction in healthcare professions generally, few focus exclusively on dental assistants in Saudi Arabia. The limited data restricts policymakers' ability to design targeted interventions that address the profession's unique challenges.

Gender-related factors also play a role. Given that a large proportion of dental assistants in Saudi Arabia are women, workplace policies around maternity leave, flexible scheduling, and career breaks can influence both satisfaction and retention. In some cases, rigid schedules and lack of part-time options may discourage long-term commitment to the profession.

Finally, there is a policy gap in recognizing specialized dental assistant roles. Unlike in some international contexts where assistants can formally specialize in orthodontics, oral surgery, or practice management—with corresponding pay and title adjustments—such roles are not widely formalized in Saudi Arabia. The absence of these career distinctions limits both earning potential and professional recognition, thereby affecting job satisfaction and retention rates.

Conclusion

Dental assistants play an indispensable role in the Saudi dental sector, contributing to patient care, clinical efficiency, and the overall quality of oral healthcare services. This narrative review highlights that while many dental assistants in Saudi Arabia report moderate satisfaction—particularly in areas such as teamwork and patient interaction—persistent challenges remain in salary progression, career advancement, and equitable access to training opportunities.

The interrelationship between job satisfaction and career development is clear: when dental assistants have access to structured career pathways, supportive workplace environments, and accessible continuing professional development, their motivation, performance, and retention rates improve significantly. Conversely, limited opportunities for advancement, especially in rural areas, and the absence of formal specialization frameworks can lead to professional stagnation and higher turnover.

Addressing these issues aligns with the broader objectives of Saudi Vision 2030, which seeks to strengthen healthcare capacity, enhance workforce development, and improve patient care quality. Implementing standardized career frameworks, expanding CPD accessibility, and adopting international best practices adapted to the Saudi context will not only benefit dental assistants but also support the long-term sustainability and excellence of the Kingdom's dental services.

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